

Tenant Firms' Trust Towards the Technology Park Management: The Case of a Turkish Technology Park

Introduction

Technology parks co-locate high technology firms in a bounded cluster, usually near a university (Bellavista & Sanz, 2009), to provide a nurturing ecosystem for the tenant firms, usually small and medium sized enterprises, that lack the resources and structures needed for growth (Balboni, Bortoluzzi, Pugliese, & Tracogna, 2019; Ruokolainen & Igel, 2022). Co-location and proximity are expected to generate social capital through interactions among tenant firms, which can provide emotional support, advice, and referrals (Laursen, Masciarelli, & Prencipe, 2012; Krishnan, Cook, Kozhikode, & Schilke, 2021), which are vital for innovation and collaboration (Allen, Gloor, Fronzetti Colladon, Woerner, & Raz, 2016; Banc & Messeghem, 2020).

Simply bringing firms together may not result in their collaboration; however, why companies in technology parks do not collaborate is yet understudied (Ruokolainen & Igel, 2022).

Extant literature notes that technopark managers need to be proactive in company matchmaking and introductions, bonding rituals (Krishnan et al., 2021), and developing interfirm communication channels (Ratten, 2020; Spigel & Harrison, 2018).

The present study explores a theme that emerged during a qualitative study in a technology park associated with a major Turkish university, investigating the process of social capital leading to collaborative innovation and the role of generalized trust. Using a semi-structured interview guide, this study asked twelve managers from different companies their experiences about their companies' relationships with other tenant companies and whether these interactions led to any collaborations. The interviews were conducted during July-August 2020. The codes emerged from the data and were not set *a priori*.

One emerging theme was the degree of trust tenant companies had towards the technopark management. We can regard the technopark management as a kind of network facilitator who sets up the network structure, coordinates activities, ensures knowledge transfer, and facilitates trust building (Mesquita, 2007; Mueller, 2022). However, technology park tenant companies are seldom highly motivated to collaborate with each other (Ruokolainen & Igel, 2022) and the lack of trust (or even distrust) in the network facilitator can be yet another hindrance (Mueller, 2022; Nienaber et al., 2017). The technology park management under study is a for-profit company, and as such, is a third party to the tenant firm interactions. While its mission explicitly notes the aim of generating university-industry synergies, it does not particularly identify with the role of enhancing inter-tenant firm collaborations.

The findings related to trust in the technology park management have been investigated through the definitions of *competence trust* and *goodwill trust* (Nooteboom, 1996; Ring and Van de Ven, 1992), where competence trust refers to the expectation that the other party will be predictable, and goodwill trust is the expectation that the other party will be benevolent and cooperative.

Preliminary findings

A factor where competence and goodwill trust are tested in the eyes of the tenant firms is the process of firm selection for entry in the technology park. While some tenant firms respect the selection by stating that they regard other tenant firms as capable, some question why large firms with vast resources are allowed in. While being able to attract such firms may bring prestige to the technology park and generate competence trust towards the technology park managers, there seems to be a lack of goodwill trust towards this choice, given that most of the larger firms do not collaborate with the smaller companies in the ecosystem.

“After all, there are certain criteria for being a technology park firm. Of course, having a company that meets those criteria gives you more confidence than a company you will work with in [Industrial Zone].” P12

“Smaller firms were snubbed a bit at that stage; they didn’t find a safe environment suitable for them. While doors were flying open for Firm K [large white goods firm], when a two-person company applied, they were questioned a lot more...Therefore, the number of small companies with potentially breakthrough improvements could not increase...After a while, the relationship with the...management turns into a landlord-tenant relationship.” P2

“We hate Firm A, Firm B [big companies in the defense industry] and these kinds of firms, as a culture. Because we believe they kill the proactivity; they create an artificial R&D atmosphere...Such big structures shouldn’t be here; they are not motivational in poor countries like us, hungry for success.” P11

The technology park management is trusted in terms of doing the “right” things (competence) to support their tenant firms when it comes to networking activities, like social events, innovation competitions, accelerator programs, and project fairs that enable useful interactions among tenants.

“Clustering activities in fact accelerate things; who does what, getting acquainted, and establishing trust faster. When we learned about our colleagues’ work, we collaborated with people, with the types of companies that overlapped with us, whom we needed, who complemented us.” P3

I believe it was 2017, there were very successful fair organizations abroad all the time...Therefore, those 4-5 days you spent abroad with groups of 20 people enabled us to establish relationships in quite an accelerated way. P8

The technopark management team provides some referral support to some tenant companies, which is appreciated. Such matchmaking done by the experts in the management is mostly an informal, voluntary activity and not part of the official services (goodwill trust).

“For instance, Mr. S [technology park general manager] tells me, “You might have something in common with this firm” and I talk to them even if they are not exactly in my area. Ms. B [technology park expert] sends me a list of companies...she is working with, and I try to do whatever I can, given time limits. It would be good if all the experts did this.” P7

While the management is regarded as sufficiently active in enabling interfirm networking, the lack of a platform for companies to share information (e.g., about suppliers to use, hiring employees, sharing resources) was also brought up. While this seems to be an issue regarding an overlooked need (hence, a lack of competence), some statements also seem to hint at a controlling stance by the management (hence, a lack of goodwill).

“Actually just recently I suggested to Mr. S [technology park general manager] that maybe we should form a Slack group...We already form a community among ourselves but this can be even more structured. This would make this an attractive place. This is a topic that frustrates me a lot, by the way.” P11

“[Technology park management] continuously establishes a one-to-N relationship...Broadcasting from a single point...The most important contribution of the managing company is to establish the infrastructure to increase the synergy between companies...for example, collaboration via a forum environment.” P1

Some participants criticized the management’s monitoring of the tenant firms by asking for excessive documentation and using face recognition software. These actions were regarded as controlling behavior, reducing goodwill trust.

“For instance, are you paying the rent on time? Are you providing the forms in order? This is the only technology park where face recognition is used to make sure people are not just getting tax benefits. This place claims that “I’m preventing this tax law from being abused.” But actually this is a suffocating attitude towards tenant firms...It seems to be turning into a gendermarie position.” P2

As part of the management team, the general manager (who was appointed about four years ago) seems to generate feelings of competence trust and goodwill trust in the tenant firms, as he is a former successful entrepreneur.

“Why do I like Mr. S [technology park general manager]? The guy has formed his company, he knows software developers, he knows the troubles...I can just tell my complaints to him as they are. I think he is a very constructive person and will change a lot of things with his vision...I don’t think the rest of the operational team are that agile.” P11

Discussion and Future work

Mueller (2022) has developed a comprehensive theoretical model showing the antecedents of trust in the network facilitator and linking this trust to the performance outcomes of the network. According to the theoretical arguments in Mueller's study, third party facilitators who are not competitors of the network firms (as in the present study):

- a) would be regarded as less competent (having less of an entrepreneurial mindset), but having more goodwill, particularly as they are taken to be neutral
- b) are less motivated by financial performance incentives of the network as they are not directly paid by the network firms.

However, the data of the present study eschews clear delineation of these concepts. While certain practices of the management, such as applying face recognition software, is effective and neutral, it nonetheless reduces goodwill trust. The management's choice to bring in large firms to the network, while being an indication of competence for the technology park management, can be regarded as eroding goodwill trust from the rest of the firms. As another example, the present general manager's entrepreneurial mindset seems to be equally trust building when compared to his mediating activities. Mueller's (2022) data comes from the network facilitators themselves, whereas the trust felt towards these positions is viewed from the perspective of the tenant firms in the present study, which may be one reason for the somewhat conflicting associations.

Furthermore, Mueller's study uses data from major developed countries, which often do not have the same trust dynamics as emerging markets. Turkey specifically falls into a cluster of countries with low generalized trust (Fainshmidt, Judge, Aguilera, & Smith, 2018), which could imply different micro-level entities to be at play when assessing macro-level outcomes.

The nature of the present study is exploratory, as it focuses on an emergent theme noted in the qualitative data collected on interfirm trust and collaboration in a Turkish technology park.

Hence the findings presented here are preliminary and warrant further data collection to identify clearer patterns regarding goodwill and competence trust towards third party network facilitators and any outcomes of such facets of trust.

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